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James Allen Reed: First Permanent Settler in
Trempealeau County and Founder
of Trempealeau

By Dr. Eben D. Pierce

[From the Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin for
1914, pages 107-117]

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JAMES ALLEN REED

James Allen Reed

James Allen Reed: First Permanent Settler
in Trempealeau County and Founder
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By Dr. Eben D. Pierce

Among the restless Scotch-Irish pioneers that Kentucky, in the early day, sent into Wisconsin and the Northwest, there are few with a life so picturesque and full of interesting incidents as James Reed. Born in Kentucky in 1798, he early became part of the rough, hardy life of the frontier. As a child he heard with eager delight the stirring tales related by Indian

¹The material for the following sketch was furnished largely by Antoine Grignon, who was a stepson of Reed, and had a longer acquaintance with him than any person now living. For Grignon's "Recollections", see Wisconsin Historical Society *Proceedings*, 1913, 110. Others who have furnished recollections of Reed are: John Perkins and Mrs. Mary House, children of Reed's friend, Charles H. Perkins Sr. and Mrs. Charles H. Perkins Jr., a daughter-in-law; Mrs. John Reed, daughter-in-law of the pioneer; and Mary Brandenberg, who wrote down at his own dictation the account of Reed's trip into Iowa on a French train. C. R. McGilvray, whom Reed taught to trap beaver, furnished many interesting incidents; also S. D. Noyes, William Huttonow, William Bennett, Mrs. Charles Cleveland. Mrs. Louise Wilson kindly lent me a daguerreotype of Reed, the only picture of the old pioneer known to be extant.

Among references in print that have been consulted are the volumes of the *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, and L. H. Bunnell, *Winona and its Environs on the Mississippi in Ancient and Modern Days* (Winona, Minn. 1897). Data concerning Reed's career as a soldier and a farmer for the Sioux at Winona have been furnished by the War Department, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs at Washington.

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fighters, trappers, and traders who enjoyed the hospitality of his father's fireside; tales of thrilling encounters and hair-breadth escapes from the wild beasts and still wilder red men of the forest. Like most boys of the frontier he was unlearned in the lore of books, though he could read and write, but in the school of nature he early became an adept. To him the great, deep forest stretching away to the unexplored westland, was an open book; and he could follow a trail, wield the hunting knife, or throw the tomahawk with more cunning than the native Indians, while as a rifle shot he acquired, even on the western frontier where every man is an expert, wide renown.

When a mere stripling Reed resolved on a military career, and the War of 1812 furnished his fighting blood and martial spirit an outlet, some claiming that youthful as he was he saw service in the latter part of that war. Some time after the close of the War of 1812 Reed enlisted in the regular army, and was sent to Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien. Here his skill with the rifle, his knowledge of woodcraft and Indian customs, and his utility as a scout, interpreter, and courier quickly attracted the attention of his superiors, and before his term of enlistment had expired he had risen to the rank of sergeant. Although Reed was an excellent soldier, his greatest service to the government was in the capacity of scout, and long after his term of enlistment was over he was employed by the commander at Fort Crawford to conduct bodies of soldiers through the wilderness on expeditions against the Indians.

During his army life Reed married a Potawatomi woman, by whom he had five children, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, Madeline, and James. Upon her death in 1830 he was married a second time to a Menominee mixed blood, widow of the trader, Russell Farnham. Two children, Margaret and John, resulted from this union. He later married the widow of Amable Grignon, whose son Antoine was the chief source of this biography.

While in the United States army serviee at Fort Crawford Reed learned the carpenter trade and helped in the construction of some of the frame buildings of Prairie du Chien. He found plenty of work both in the army and outside, but he had planned to become a fur trader. Accordingly, after getting his discharge, he entered the employ of the American Fur Company, devoting

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his time to hunting, trapping, and trading with the Indians. He was stationed for over a year at Red Cedar, Iowa, where he opened a trading post among the Indians, sending his accumulated furs overland by cart to Prairie du Chien. During the absence of his cart-train he had but a single companion, a Sioux boy about sixteen years old. One morning while this boy was alone a band of fifteen Sauk warriors passing by murdered him, and were in the act of scalping him when Reed appeared on the scene. Angered at the brutal murder of his helpless Indian boy he turned his rifle on the fleeing band of Sauks, and fired, killing one of the warriors. He then called out to the Indians, daring them to return and fight like braves, in loud and angry tones naming them cowards and murderers. They continued their flight, however over a distant ridge, being fully convinced that the trapper not only was in earnest but was an excellent shot as well. Reed, expecting the Sauks to return that night and give him trouble, prepared everything for a surprise, sleeping with his loaded rifle on his arm ready for instant use. For weeks afterwards he was entirely alone at the trading post. Years later he told Grignon it was the most lonely and hazardous position of all his life, living in constant expectation of hostile Indians, and traveling on perilous expeditions through the surrounding territory in quest of furs. He had no further trouble with the Indians while at Red Cedar, but after remaining a year he decided to return to Prairie du Chien where he again entered the government service. During the Black Hawk War he was engaged to help take a keel boat up the Mississippi to Bad Axe. Returning to Prairie du Chien he was sent as a courier with important messages to the army, which was nearing Bad Axe. He traveled the distance on a pony and arrived in time to witness the battle that ensued.²

Although in the government service, Reed always denounced the cruel, unrelenting slaughter of the half-starved, dispirited Indians, who had tried in vain to surrender to the army opposing them, and were peaceably withdrawing with their wives and children to the west side of the Mississippi. During the battle Reed saw two Indian maidens embrace each other and

² See account in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, XII, 257-261.

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jump into the river, and as they rose to the surface of the water the soldiers fired on them and the crimson streaks of blood mingling with the tawny waters showed where their lifeless bodies sank from sight. It was a pitiful sight to watch the slaughter of the helpless women and children of the unfortunate Sauks, and what added to the horror was the appearance of the Sicux, who had been notified of the coming conflict, on the opposite side of the river, finishing the slaughter by shooting, tomahawking, and scalping the poor, bedraggled Indians as they landed on the Minnesota shore.

When the struggle was over Reed started on his pony for Prairie du Chien, and while riding through the woods he came upon a lone Sauk woman who had made her escape from the soldiers and ill-fated Indians and was hiding in the woods in a half-starved condition. Reed spoke kindly to her, assuring her of his protection, and dismounting gave her a portion of food from his saddlebags. After she had eaten he helped her into the saddle, and with his rifle in hand led the way along the homeward trail. They took turn about riding and walking until they reached Prairie du Chien, stopping only at night to camp, and at intervals for refreshments. When their destination was reached Reed turned his captive over to the military authorities, who in turn sent her to join her people in Iowa.

After the Black Hawk War Reed was sent among the Iowa Indians on business for the government. He started on his French train, which consisted of a sled made of oak hewn from the tree, and fastened together with wooden pegs. The sled, about three feet wide and seven feet long, was just wide enough to seat a man comfortably. It had hewn slabs fastened from runner to runner, on which was placed a pair of blankets rolled up in a tanned buckskin. Two poles were attached to the front top of the runners and to these the Indian pony was hitched by means of a harness made of buckskin straps, sewed with deer sinews; the whippletree was fastened with the same material. "I started on my train," said Reed, "taking my old flintlock rifle and ammunition to last the trip, for I was expected to kill game enough for my living. On my way I chanced to kill a big, fat bear, and when I reached the Indian camp and exhibited my game a howl of joy went up among the

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redskins. We dressed and cooked the bear Indian fashion, making soup of him, which I ate with the natives in their manner, and in order to show my appreciation I ate the last drop of soup and then licked the dish as the Indians did. That lick gained for me and the government our point without a thought of bloodshed, and after shaking hands with my Indian friends I took my departure on my French train for Prairie du Chien."

The next three years after his return from Iowa Reed occupied himself as tavern keeper in Prairie du Chien. His reputation as a fearless hunter and Indian trader, and the many hardy adventures he had experienced, equipped him with a fund of frontier stories as thrilling as the varied life of that day afforded. He could speak several Indian dialects, and his long association with the French at the Prairie settlement enabled him to acquire a fair command of their language. To the French he was known as Reed *l'Américain*; while by many, on account of his military record, he was called Captain Reed.

Around the fireplace in his tavern was often gathered an interesting throng of hunters, trappers, traders, and Indians, and the usual town loafers. Many strange tales of frontier life and backwoods lore were told, and wanderers from far up the Mississippi brought glowing accounts of the northern country where game and fur bearing animals abounded, and where Indians roamed wild and undisturbed by white settlers. The longing for the wild, free life of the trapper caused Reed to abandon tavern keeping and resume his employ with the American Fur Company. While on his journeys up and down the Mississippi in the interests of the fur company, as well as when in the government service, he had remarked the beauty of the situation of Trempealeau and had decided to locate there whenever a favorable opportunity should offer. Circumstances delayed him until 1840, and gave his son-in-law, James Douville, the credit of being the first settler. However, Reed had chosen the site for a town and had in view plans for its future settlement some time before Douville came. In the summer of 1840 he built a log house on his well-selected site a few rods from the bank of the Mississippi and hither he brought his family, resolved to make this his permanent home. One

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day while hewing logs with his broadax for the construction of his building a drunken Sioux by the name of Face-on-Fire came along and began to abuse him. Reed said very little but at last, the taunting continuing, his temper gave way, and raising his broadax he threw it at the Indian. It came so dangerously near the Sioux that he was frightened and left, not daring to show himself again for days.

Reed, after finishing his log house, followed his favorite vocation of hunting and trapping in the Trempealeau Valley. A few months after his arrival his wife died, and within two years he married the widow Grignon, who was a relative of the Sioux chief Wabashaw. Her relationship with the noted chief gave Reed great prestige among this band of Sioux, which together with his experience with the Indians while in the government service secured for him the position of government farmer for Wabashaw's band of Indians who were then living on the site of Winona, Minnesota. He entered on his new occupation as government farmer and storekeeper sometime in October, 1842, and two years later with the help of L. H. Bunnell, erected the first house built in Winona. This was a government storehouse, constructed of white ash logs.

In May, 1844, an incident occurred at Winona which illustrates the fearlessness of Reed in a crisis. He had learned from the trader La Bathe,³ an eye witness, of the murder of an old friend, Sheriff Lester, by a Sioux of Little Crow's band named O-mah-haugh-tay. Chaneing to be in the tent of his relative, Wabashaw, when the murderer dropped in for a visit, he was angered at the consideration with whieh the fellow was received, and declined the courtesy of smoking the pipe which was offered him. The murderer, emboldened by the success of his crime, seized the pipe and himself presented it to Reed, with unfeigned malignity in his eye. Reed, whose resentment was kindled into flame by this fresh act of audacity, dashed the pipe to the ground, and denouncing the Sioux as a dog, informed him there was one white man who did not fear him. It was the gravest insult that could be offered to an Indian, but

³ For a brief account of this trader see Wis. His. Soc. *Proceedings*, 1906, 253.

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O-mah-haugh-tay was cowed, and soon after took his departure from the village.

While engaged as government farmer at Wabashaw's village, Reed kept in touch with his Trempealeau settlement, which was known as Reed's Town or Reed's Landing, and which consisted of some eight or ten French families and a few French and Indian mixed bloods. The Trempealeau bluffs and adjoining prairie afforded an excellent stock range for Reed's horses, hogs, and cattle which he had brought from Prairie du Chien, and the swine proved to be good rattlesnake hunters, killing and eating many of the Winnebago's sacred serpents.

Reed remained in the employ of the government as farmer for the Indians until 1848, when negotiations were entered into for the removal of Wabashaw's band of Sioux from their old-time village at Winona. After their removal Reed returned to Trempealeau and was occupied in tending his stock and in hunting and trapping. He kept tavern for a while, and many a weary traveler and homeseeker found a hospitable welcome at his fireside. His tavern was a large log structure located near the bank of the Mississippi known simply as Reed's Place; after he sold out it became the Washington Hotel.

At the first town election held April, 1851, at La Crosse, James Reed was elected justice. Trempealeau was then included in La Crosse County. Whether there were any cases for the justice court during Reed's term of office is doubtful. Differences were likely to be settled in the more primitive way of hand to hand encounters, and if this failed an appeal to the higher court of firearms was taken.

While in Trempealeau Captain Reed had occasional differences with the Indians. He burned the old mission house⁴ at Trempealeau Bay to keep the Winnebago from catching and riding his horses which gathered in its shelter, thus galling their backs with heavy loads.

One autumn day in the early fifties a number of Indians came to Trempealeau to do some trading, and brought along the usual number of dogs. Reed had some hogs running loose near his house; the dogs began to chase them and succeeded in killing one of their number and injuring several others. When

⁴ *Ibid*, 251, 252.

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Reed saw the Indians coming he took down his rifle and, walking into the yard, shot seven of the dogs; this done he returned to the house, reloaded his gun, and waited results. Nothing more was heard of the Indians that day, but the next morning about fifteen of their number returned and began grumbling about their dogs being killed and demanded pay for them. Reed listened a while to their complaints, then becoming angry he took down his rifle and pointed into the muzzle saying, "I have something in here which I will give you as pay if you don't all clear out of here at once." Without waiting for the contents of the well-known rifle the redskins fled, knowing the old trapper was in earnest. As a result of this trouble one of the Winnebago, named Hakah, plotted to kill Reed and went so far as to hide in ambush behind a pine tree along the trail where Reed came after his horses every evening towards sundown. When Reed appeared the Indian noticed the well-known rifle slung across his shoulder, which so unnerved Hakah, that he kept in his hiding place until his enemy had passed, not wishing to take a chance of missing Reed and being killed for his pains.

In 1853 Reed sold his Trempealeau property to Benjamin Healy and moved with his family onto a piece of government land in the Little Tamaraek. This was in some respects a better situation for one of his temperament, as it was in closer proximity to the most desirable hunting ground. From here he took the trail over the bluff on many a long hunting expedition.

When George Luce, formerly of Galesville, was a boy he went on a hunting trip up the Trempealeau Valley with Captain Reed. They camped in one of the valleys near the present town of Arcadia, and as several hunting parties of Indians were in the immediate vicinity Reed deemed it advisable to take precautions against surprise, inasmuch as the Indians looked upon the white hunter with jealous eyes. Therefore the men set to work digging a hole in the ground for their night's camp fire. After completing this they cooked their supper, and enjoyed it smoking hot from the fire.

After nightfall the sound of howling wolves disturbed the hunters and as the night wore on the howling became louder

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and more hideous; apparently the campers were surrounded by wolves, but Reed began to mistrust the origin of the sounds and called out loudly in the Winnebago language, "If you want our scalps come and get them." At this the howling stopped. Reed and Luce sat up all night with their rifles across their knees, expecting the Winnebago wolves to return, but no more disturbance occurred, and after finishing their hunt the men returned home in safety. Luce told of Reed's skill as a hunter and said the old trapper always rode with his rifle across the pommel of his saddle Indian fashion.

At the time of the New Ulm massacre in Minnesota during the early part of the Civil War, the people of Trempealeau and vicinity were one day thrown into a panic of fear by the announcement that a large party of hostile Sioux was advancing from Black River upon Trempealeau. With one impulse the settlers turned to Reed for protection and the wary old trapper responded with energy. He knew the cunning savage and did not propose to be taken by a night surprise. All night long he patrolled Trempealeau Prairie, mounted on his favorite pony and carrying his trusty rifle ready for instant use, but it turned out that the report was false and no Indians came to disturb the frightened settlers.

Reed's numerous journeys throughout the Trempealeau country in quest of furs made him familiar with all of its streams, its ranges of hills, its numerous valleys as well as its woodland haunts and expanses of rolling wild grassland and marshes. Indeed he learned the country as thoroughly as a Mississippi River pilot learns the river, and was able to make serviceable use of his knowledge of the trails, the short cuts, the passes, and the divides.

"We were following along a range of hills one day mounted on our ponies," said Antoine Grignon, "Reed, his son John, and myself. It was past noon and we were getting mighty hungry. As we came over a hog's back and neared a rocky peak, Reed pointed down a valley and said, 'boys, this is the nearest way to Beaver Creek where we can go and catch some trout for dinner.' We gladly turned our ponies toward the valley, and in a short time came to the creek. Reed cut a small pole and took from his pocket a fishline and hook and after

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catching some grasshoppers for bait started to fish. Inside of half an hour we had all the trout we needed for dinner, and cutting some forked sticks to hold them, we built a fire and broiled them. It was a splendid meal, and I believe that is the best way to cook fish—all you want is a little salt."

As a trapper Reed could not be excelled. He caught all varieties of the fur bearing animals which at that time abounded in this region such as the muskrat, mink, marten, otter, raccoon, and beaver, but made a special effort to get beaver.

Late one afternoon in 1863 Reed came to my father's house on foot and said his pony was mired in a marsh just over the hill from our place. My father secured the help of two neighbors and in company with Reed went over the hill to help extricate it. The men worked hard for nearly an hour, and succeeded in getting the pony out without injuring it. On the pony's back was a large pack of beaver pelts and traps. When the men reached our home it was dark and Reed remained all night. My father offered him a bed but he preferred to sleep on the floor, with his pack of furs for a pillow and a blanket spread over him. Early in the morning he departed for his home in the Little Tamarack.

Throughout the upper Trempealeau Valley at this time Reed was known as Trapper Reed, and often the remote settler would see his solitary figure, mounted on his pony, winding along the hills or threading his way through some woody solitude over the unblazed trail to the haunts of the beaver.

While living in the Little Tamarack Reed had two hunting dogs of which he was very fond. One day while hunting with them near the present town of Dodge they came upon a panther and chased it into the bluffs, where it turned and offered fight. The dogs flew at it and although they fought furiously the panther seemed to be getting the best of them, and had one of the dogs nearly disabled when Reed came up. He did not dare use his rifle for fear of wounding his dogs and yet he was bound to help them; so, drawing his tomahawk he entered the fray, working his way into the fighting mass as best he could and at length by a well directed blow succeeded in killing the panther. The wounded dog recovered and lived to join in many a subsequent hunt.

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James Reed was a man of medium height, with broad shoulders and a large chest; his complexion was florid, and his hair light brown, almost a sandy hue, while his eyes were a grayish blue. He was a quick, active man, alert and ready for any emergency. He often dressed like the Indians with a blanket thrown over his shoulders and fastened around his waist with a belt. In disposition he was kind and genial and he was an accommodating and friendly neighbor.

After the death of his wife Reed lived alone in his log cabin in the Little Tamarack. He still made journeys on his pony up the Trempealeau Valley on hunting and trapping expeditions, and continued his backwoods life until a year before his death, when the increasing infirmities of age caused him to abandon his favorite vocation. He then lived with his son John for a time, and during his last illness stayed at the home of his old friend and neighbor, Charles H. Perkins, where he died in June, 1873.

He had been such a man as the frontier demanded; he understood the Indians, and dealt with them kindly or severely as occasion demanded; while his firmness and fairness won for him the respect of all his associates.

Perhaps a future generation will build a monument to this romantic character. If so I hope it will be erected on old Liberty Peak, and will represent Reed mounted on his pony, with his rifle across the pommel of his saddle, looking out upon the peaceful bosom of the Mississippi, where the scenes of his eventful life were enacted. Such a monument, expressive of the pioneer hunter and instinct with the spirit of a departed age, would fittingly grace the noble crest of Trempealeau's venerable bluff.

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